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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR - AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA  
PREPAREDNESS

REF: STATE 209622

1. Per reftel, post is providing the following information regarding the GOE's efforts to control Avian Influenza (AI) and its capability to respond to an influenza pandemic. The answers are keyed to reftel questions.

A) PREPAREDNESS/COMMUNICATION

-- The GOE began working on a preparedness plan to prevent and contain AI in September 2005. National Director of Public Health Dr. Marcelo Aguilar will provide Econoff with a copy of the plan upon its completion on December 15. The plan divides up preparedness and containment duties among the Ministry of Public Health (MPH), the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG), and the Ministry of Environment (MOE). The MAG, to include its Ecuadorian Sanitary Service (SESA), will be the main point of contact on AI. The MPH will be the lead for human components of influenza viruses. The MOE will focus on wild migratory bird issues.

-- Individual interests are able to manipulate the national discourse through their influence over the press. This influence could extend to AI discussions as well. The lack of professionalism in the Ecuadorian press makes them susceptible to such pressure. Meanwhile, delayed or inaccurate reporting on AI outbreaks in either humans or animals also could result from poor communication within the GOE rather than a lack of desire to be forthcoming. For example, Dr. Aguilar notes that poor inter-Ministry communication is his biggest fear regarding the accurate and timely reporting of outbreaks.

-- The GOE is preoccupied with a number of politically charged issues that detract from AI. While within health circles AI is a top priority, concern with its political survival keeps the presidency from making AI issues more prominent. Only an outbreak of AI in Ecuador would raise the issue to a higher priority.

-- In the MAG, the main contact for AI is Dr. Abel Viteri, the Director of SESA. The MPH contact is National Director of Public Health Dr. Marcelo Aguilar.

-- The National Health System Law establishes an inter-institutional and regional network of detection, reporting, and containment that would guide the country's response to an AI outbreak. Post has no indication that this Law would undermine GOE preparedness regarding AI. MPH officials report that the Law is consistent with international health regulations.

-- The GOE is engaged with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) on AI and other health-related issues. GOE leaders would be more receptive to messages from international organizations, rather than the USG. In addition, the MPH has expressed concern that from an operational (though not scientific) perspective, language barriers would undermine any bilateral programs with the United States.

-- The GOE currently does not administer annual flu shots. Ecuador does not have any production capability for flu shots and would purchase vaccines from Brazil if it initiates a flu shot campaign planned for 2006. Ecuador is not technologically capable of developing an H5N1 vaccine. Ecuador's Sanitary Registry Law provides for liability protection.

-- The MPH and the MAG maintain their own press offices through which they share information with the press and with a network of public officials. Community-based radio is one of the more effective means of informing rural areas. Meanwhile, sensationalism by the press can misinform the public. For example, following the October 2005 detection of a low pathogenicity strain of avian influenza in Colombia that was not/not identified as the H5N1 strain, Ecuadorian press provided extensive coverage about the hazards AI poses to human health. Ecuadorian consumers, out of fear for AI and uninformed about the exact nature of the Colombian avian influenza strain, drastically reduced poultry consumption. This triggered a 30% drop in poultry sales that lowered poultry prices to unsustainable levels and caused financial

problems within the feed industry. Currently, the poultry industry, through the Poultry Producers Association (CONAVE), is investing large amounts of money in radio spots and other media to educate consumers regarding the real consequences of AI.

#### B) SURVEILLANCE/DETECTION

-- The GOE maintains 3 labs that could provide initial testing of samples. The labs are geographically located in the north (Quito), the coastal region (Guayaquil), and the south (Cuenca). The GOE also maintains a relationship with the CDC to which isolated samples can be sent for verification.

-- The most critical gap in Ecuador's detection and response capabilities is a lack of anti-viral stockpiles. Despite the countrywide network of health-care professionals, Ecuadorian health care services lack equipment and adequately trained personnel necessary to adequately respond to an AI outbreak. Dr. Aguilar also noted the lack of field emergency hospitals that would assist in responding to outbreaks in rural areas.

#### C) RESPONSE/CONTAINMENT

-- The GOE maintains no stockpiles of Amantadine, Rimantadine, Oseltamivir, or Relenza. The MPH reports that they have placed orders for Oseltamivir (Tamiflu). The delivery date for this order is not known. The MPH maintains a network of vaccine banks that provides refrigeration capabilities for the distribution of vaccines. Supplies of protective gear, while available in some areas, are very low.

-- The GOE is in the process of finalizing guidelines for the culling and vaccination of birds, disinfection of facilities, and animal movement with respect to an outbreak of AI. However, finalized guidelines will not guarantee a rapid response because GOE institutions can be highly ineffective and inter-institutional communication is wanting.

-- The banning last month of poultry imports from Colombia shows the GOE's willingness and ability to take action swiftly. At the same time, the action also shows erroneous application of World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) standards since the AI outbreak in Colombia was proven to be a low-pathogenic strain of the virus, making the import ban unjustified under OIE. Such decisions, whether or not they are justified on public health grounds or used as an excuse to limit competition for local producers, require the necessary political will and interest. The Ecuadorian military is capable of imposing quarantines and social distancing measures. The Ecuadorian military currently participates in regional response exercises with local and international health agencies.

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